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ABSTRACT

This Digest reviews some ideas and suggestions about parental involvement in middle school education, focusing on the language arts. The Digest reviews the research on how to increase parental involvement in middle schools and presents several programs already in use at various middle schools. The diverse programs outlined in the Digest feature interactive writing homework, a booktalk approach, a reading club, and dramatics. (NKA)

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Parent Participation in Middle School Language Arts

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by *Nola Kortner Aiex*

In an article entitled "Do Middle Schools Work? In a Word YES!" (1993) Peter Scales maintains that research indicates that middle schools are very successful at meeting the needs and developmental characteristics of young adolescents. One reason for their success, he believes, is that middle schools generally use a team approach that provides stability and continuity as teachers integrate subject areas into broader themes and units. Parents should be part of this team approach, and most middle schools welcome parents as part of the team.

This *Digest* will review some ideas and suggestions about parental involvement in middle school education, focusing on the language arts.

Developmental Concerns and the Middle School Student

Although parental involvement appears to be especially important to students during the middle years, these early adolescent years are often turbulent and difficult for young people. For example, according to a study by Cotton and Mann (1994), concerns are sometimes voiced by administrators about the psychology of the middle school student and his/her feelings about parents. Many middle school adolescents seem to be at an age when they do not want to have their parents around. Cotton and Mann quote one principal as saying "these kids weren't born, they were hatched at age 13 without any parents at all." Such comments, although amusing, make it difficult to recognize that early adolescents should be seen as "real human beings who participate in the larger world and have serious concerns about the world and their own adolescence (Beane, 1992). For recent information about adolescent development, see Wavering (1995); for developmental theories, see Jordan (1993); for a resource on adolescent literature with life-connecting topics, see Sheppard and Stratton (1993).

Increasing Parental Involvement

While educators now recognize that it is imperative for schools to find ways to increase parental and family involvement in children's education, the comments in the preceding section show that they are sometimes unsure as to the most effective ways of doing so.

Nevertheless, Cotton and Mann's study (1994) concluded that there is a substantial amount of parent involvement already happening at the middle school level. Generally, parents are involved when their children are part of the activity—open house, conferences, dances, etc. The goal is to involve them on a day-to-day basis.

Epstein et al. (1992) state that "research shows that parent involvement improves student achievement." In the teacher's manual developed by Epstein for an interactive homework program called TIPS, the team approach cited at the beginning of this Digest is put forth as the best approach. She and her group also emphasize that "teachers play a critical role in whether families are involved in their children's education."

TIPS features homework assignments that require students to talk to someone at home about something interesting that they are learning in class. However, it makes the homework the students' responsibility and does not ask parents to "teach" subjects or skills they are not prepared to teach. With TIPS, homework becomes a 3-way partnership involving students, families, and teachers.

TIPS provides clear step-by-step explanations as to what is expected of the parents and the students. The appendix dealing with language arts contains both explanatory and narrative writing activities, sections on grammar and on words and meanings, as well as material about linking reading and writing. A letter to the parents explains the objective of each activity, when it is due, and the materials needed to complete it.

In another program, working together, a language arts teacher and a librarian at one middle school adopted a "booktalk" approach to improve parental participation in their young adolescents' reading (Morris & Kaplan, 1994). (Parents received advance notice of the program by mail at the start of the school year.) Students were given a list of 15 books from which to select one—a class period was spent talking about each book and giving the students time to examine the books. They then went home and shared the list with the adult with whom they were going to read. Students signed up for 5 books in order of preference and were prepared for possibly

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not receiving their first choice. Students were put into groups according to book titles—each group was limited to about 10 students. Books were distributed and students and their parent reading partners were given about 3 weeks to read their books. Booktalks were planned, and parents were invited to attend these discussion groups.

The booktalk began with coffee, juice, and cookies, and students and their parents went to an assigned room to meet with others who had read the same book. Each group had a facilitator who had also read the book. Facilitators have been administrators, parents, math teachers, librarians—as the popularity of the program increases, so does the number of people who volunteer as facilitators. At the talks, where the desks are arranged in a circle, the facilitator begins the discussion with general questions about the book, but conversation usually flows freely. Morris and Kaplan (1994) state that: "given the opportunity, middle school students and their parents enjoy discussing topics together." They also report that many adults were surprised that their children could discuss literary books so well. After the activity was completed, students wrote letters of commentary to their parents—letters which allowed for further activities at school and which, in many cases, strengthened communication between parents and children.

Folsom (1994) implemented a similar program with students in a rural middle school to improve their interest in reading. She recruited parents who agreed to enroll their children in a "reading club." These parents agreed to read to their children on a daily basis and to turn in simple reading logs each month. For their efforts, every month children were rewarded with a free book of their choice. Reading interests did, indeed, improve, and parents were gratified by their children's success and their own involvement in the children's education.

The Teacher's Role

Brian White (1992) stresses that cognitive preparation for reading enhances understanding of literature, "whether through discussion, direct instruction in interpretative strategies, or the sequencing of texts." He feels that if the teacher takes the time to prepare students for the literary texts they are going to read, it will pay dividends. If students can be helped to retrieve relevant background knowledge and experiences before their reading, they will be "more engaged and will read with greater understanding." Such preparation would also probably facilitate discussion in a program like Morris and Kaplan's.

A Volunteer Program

Some of the language arts are in danger of not receiving any notice at all, usually because there is no funding in the public schools for anything but the "basics." Jody Rathgeb (1994) tells the story of one dedicated volunteer who singlehandedly ran a theater program in a Pennsylvania middle school. She was so identified with dramatics that she was listed in a newsletter as the drama coach of the school district, even though her involvement was entirely voluntary—actually, no position for a drama coach existed.

She began her stint as "drama coach" by joining the school district's parent-teacher organization, since her own children were students at the time. She then organized a creative dramatics group funded through the local parks and recreation district, in the process getting the middle schoolers to work as a team. In a collaborative effort, teacher and students created a theater piece from student-written poems, giving 3 performances, 2 for parents and other adults and another for a middle school assembly. Although the children seemed to enjoy performing for their peers the most, the adult audiences seemed to appreciate the piece more. As the volunteer coach/director said: "I think the piece spoke...to the parents."

One important outcome of the program for the coach is that some of the middle school's staff members are interested in incorporating drama into their language arts curriculum. Another factor is that as a drama coach aiming eventually for a performance, the coach knew early in the process that she had to deal with her players' in-between age—"sometimes they are just kids, but at other times they want to be taken seriously by adults" (Rathgeb, 1994). For parents, helping their children in any one of the language arts during this "in-between" age can be a very rewarding experience.

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